



THE AQUINAS SOCIETY OF LONDON  
AQUINAS PAPER

No. 2

ST THOMAS AND  
NIETZSCHE

BY

F. C. COPLESTON, S.J., M.A.

BLACKFRIARS PUBLICATIONS



13-88  
St Thomas and Nietzsche

by

F. C. COPLESTON, S.J., M.A.

A Paper read to the Aquinas Society  
of London on April 15th, 1944

BLACKFRIARS

1955



*First published 1944*

*Second edition 1955*

*Nihil Obstat:*

THOMAS E. BIRD, S.T.D.

*Censor Deputatus*

*Imprimatur:*

✠ THOMAS

*Archiepiscopus Birminghamiensis*

*Birminghamiae, die 3a Julii, 1944*

Published for the Aquinas Society of London by Blackfriars Publications,  
the Editors of which do not necessarily agree with all the opinions expressed.



# ST THOMAS AND NIETZSCHE

BY

F. C. COPLESTON, S.J., M.A.

(Read to the Aquinas Society on April 15th, 1944)

WHEN I received the very kind invitation to read a paper to this Society on St Thomas and Nietzsche I not unnaturally felt somewhat perplexed. What possible contact could there be between the great professor, theologian and saint of the thirteenth century, that calm, majestic and massive figure that lives on in the close-articulated reasonings, the exact, dispassionate sentences of the *Summa Theologica* or the *De Veritate* and the strange, passionate, tormented wanderer of the nineteenth century, who hurled defiance at Christ in passages of splendid German and spent the last decade of his life in an intellectual twilight? It is a commonplace that the philosophy of St Thomas is expressed in the categories of pure intellect, that it is impersonal and objective, that the saint does not permit his intense inner life of communion with God to intrude itself into his treatment of theological and philosophical themes: we would not go to the *Summa* for elevations of soul, rapturous outpourings of love: we go to the works of St Thomas for an objective presentation of doctrine, for reasoned arguments, careful weighing of objections, for moderation and balance and sanity and logical consistency. One can imagine a discussion between St Thomas and Kant on the question whether the necessity of the *conversio ad phantasma* excludes the possibility of an objectively valid metaphysic or not, one can imagine a discussion between St Thomas and Hegel on the subject of dialectic, since both Kant and Hegel were more or less 'impersonal' thinkers—Kant, the great 'Chinaman of Königsberg', as Nietzsche called him, Hegel, whose face, we are told, mirrored no obtrusive passion but was furrowed by the lines of patient and long-continued thought. One could consider together Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, since, whatever Nietzsche would have said of Kierkegaard, the latter would most probably have been



able to understand Nietzsche 'from within'; both thinkers felt themselves to be men apart, both thinkers philosophised on a basis of their personal experience, both thinkers were opposed to the contemporary 'vulgarisation' of life, to 'bourgeois' Christianity, to democratic ideals as they understood them: the philosopher of Superman and the champion of Faith certainly had some temperamental affinity, antithetical as their respective mature philosophical outlooks may have been. But I had not been asked to speak on St Thomas and Kant or on Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but on St Thomas and Nietzsche, and therein lay the difficulty. To confront them as determined and uncompromising opponents would, of course, be an easy task; but how could one find in St Thomas an answer to some of Nietzsche's deepest yearnings and struggles—and yet, if Thomism is the perennial philosophy, there must be such an answer to be found. In the end I decided to select one aspect of Nietzsche's thought, an aspect that embodies an extreme statement of the problem of modern man, and to suggest how this problem may be resolved on the principles of the Thomistic philosophy. This treatment of the subject appears to me more valuable and promising for the purpose of the present lecture than to give a sketch of Nietzsche's philosophy in general and then to show how St Thomas would have disagreed with the greater part of it. I may not present anything particularly novel, but I hardly suppose that a Society dedicated to the study of Thomism would desire me to offset Nietzsche's subjectivity by my own.

One of the most striking passages in Nietzsche's works is that wherein he predicts the coming of an European crisis. 'The whole of our culture in Europe has long been writhing in an agony of suspense which increases from decade to decade as if in expectation of a catastrophe; restless, violent, helter-skelter, like a torrent that will *reach its bourne* and refuses to reflect—yes, which even dreads reflection.'<sup>1</sup> From this lonely observation-post in the nineteenth century he saw men and women uprooted from the past, the ancient ideals and traditions discarded, men ever active and hurrying onward, onward towards an abyss, the proximity of which they dimly discern, though they studiously avert their gaze

<sup>1</sup> *Will to Power*, I, p. 1, edit. Dr Oscar Levy. George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.



from the depth below into which none the less they are being inevitably drawn. We may compare Nietzsche's prediction of the great wars which would come in the twentieth century, 'wars, the like of which have never been before', ideological wars in which the very existence of the order will be at stake. 'There will come a day when my name will recall the memory of something formidable—a crisis the like of which has never been known on earth.'<sup>2</sup>

How clearly, in this respect at least, Nietzsche read the signs of the times, just as did his friend Professor Burckhardt. There is a passage in a book by Sir Philip Gibbs (I forget where I saw it) in which he describes how in the peaceful setting of an English country garden (in the period between the two wars) he saw suddenly in the eyes of men and women the fear of the coming catastrophe which they felt themselves powerless to avert. Many of us perhaps know that feeling, the feeling of crisis, of a dark and terrible future looming ahead, which we know *could*, absolutely speaking, be averted, but which at the same time we feel *will not* be averted, even, humanly speaking, cannot be averted. The wars predicted by Nietzsche, one of them at least, has become a terrible actuality, and it is indeed an ideological war, in which the very existence of the old order is at stake, that Christian culture to which modern Europe owes so much. Moreover, Nietzsche's name may well be for ever associated with our modern crisis, as he himself foretold, since his thought was both a product of Europe's disintegration and a cause of her further decline; however much he might dislike the Nazi in the concrete, I do not think that he either could or would deny that he suffered in his own soul the effects of what he called 'Nihilism' and that, by his own utterances, he helped in some degree to the coming of the catastrophe he predicted. He said himself that he was dynamite, spiritual dynamite; and what other effect could such dynamite have but to shatter the old, the well-established, the traditional? Nietzsche thought of himself as a creator too; but it is as dynamite, a destructive agent, that he will be remembered.

Nietzsche described the approaching catastrophe as 'the triumph of Nihilism', by which he meant 'the conviction that life is

<sup>2</sup>*Ecce Homo*, pp. 131 and 132.



absurd', 'the absolute repudiation of worth, purpose, desirability'. In his opinion Europeans in general, or at least those among them who were free from prejudice and the worship of the idols of the past, had come to doubt the objective validity of the values which hitherto had won general acceptance, had put a question mark after the old moral law—and (which is the really important point) had nothing better to put in their place. Now, it is quite possible to stop short at scepticism, at indifference, to shrug one's shoulders and follow tradition and custom in practice, in outward life, while inwardly one suspends one's judgment, disbelieves in the absolute validity of the code of conduct which one practises externally, more or less, and so stands inwardly apart from life, admitting a deep division between one's inner conviction, or lack of it, and one's exterior life. The Nihilism of such a man is confined mainly to mental scepticism and is called by Nietzsche 'passive Nihilism', a state of mind which he regarded as an expression of decadence, a lack of spiritual strength and vigour. We can discern an analogue of this *spiritual* state in Greek scepticism, which is depicted by Karl Jaspers (in his *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*) as the Nihilism of the ancient world. The attitude inculcated by the ancient sceptic was one of 'indifference', a negative attitude of suspension of judgment, involving a calm acceptation of the impossibility of any objective knowledge of reality on the one hand and a practical adherence to custom and tradition on the other hand. This polite and cultured scepticism is undoubtedly the attitude of not a few men and women; but it is obviously not the only attitude which can be adopted in face of the loss of faith in values. The Nihilistic attitude, disillusionment with the old and current values, may proceed beyond a mere passive pessimism, scepticism and agnosticism, and produce a turning against those values and a positive attempt to destroy them: it thus no longer remains a Nihilism of interior attitude alone, but becomes a Nihilism of *act*. This is what Nietzsche called 'active Nihilism', characteristic of the destroyers, the 'New Barbarians', whose coming he predicted, who will not be content to watch an ancient wall crumbling and falling, but will turn actively against the old order, to hasten its end, as a man might set his shoulder against the already tottering wall.



This active Nihilism Nietzsche regarded as an ambiguous phenomenon (it 'might be a movement either of increase or decline in Life') for it could proceed from more than one spiritual attitude. It might be the product of mere revenge and resentment, of hatred against the old order on the part of men who have no faith in that order and wish to destroy it, without at the same time having any better order to put in its place, who hate the old order simply because it fetters in some way the unbridled expression of their own decadent and base lusts and impulses. Such men would be *mere* destroyers, the barbarians 'from below', 'uprooted' men, enemies of society, enemies of themselves, and their active Nihilism would be the fruit of mere lust for revenge, lust to destroy, devoid of all creative tendency. On the other hand active Nihilism might be the product of *vision*, of disgust with the old order, with contemporary life and society, coupled with an urge to create, to create new values and a new society, it might be the product, not merely of man the destroyer but of man the creator, who sees the vision of a transfigured humanity arising on the débris of the old order. The first type of Nihilist sets his shoulder against the tottering wall and hastens its fall, just because he loves to overthrow and destroy, convinced, unconsciously at least, of his own inner inferiority and decadence; the second type of Nihilist sets his shoulder against the tottering wall to hasten its ruin, in order that he may erect a finer wall in its place, a more beautiful and abiding structure. Nietzsche, who laid great stress on the creation of new values, regarded himself as one who had lived through and overcome decadent Nihilism in his own soul, who had become an optimistic creator, a transvaluator of all values; but the importance he constantly attached to the positive and constructive aspect of his philosophy was little more than a self-administered 'remedy', an attempt to heal the gaping wound created by his loss of faith, an attempt to salve the soul-destroying effects of Nihilism within himself. If Nietzsche had been a mere passive Nihilist, a mere agnostic or rationalistic sceptic, he might have led a more tranquil life; but, as is obvious from his works, he was far too much in earnest, far too serious-minded, far too much of an 'idealist', to be content with any attitude of indifference towards ultimate values, so that, since he defiantly refused to



acquiesce in the traditional values but adopted an uncompromisingly hostile attitude towards them, he was forced to pose as creator, to preach a new constructive order. But at the same time he seems to have had the repressed knowledge that the new order which he preached was but a 'myth', that in actual fact he was a destroyer and that, by refusing to follow the one way out of Nihilism, he was irretrievably caught in its toils. The more he doubted himself, the more vehemently he denounced and preached and his cry became in the end the cry of the madman, who has turned his back on Reality to follow his own dream: Nietzsche's optimism is something forced and unreal, covering an inner despair.

That Nietzsche's active Nihilists have arrived on the European stage is only too obvious.<sup>3</sup> The Nazis (I refer, of course, to those who have been fully imbued with the Nazi ideology, not to half-hearted or fundamentally unwilling followers, and, when I refer to Nazis, I do not mean to exclude certain other groups as well)—the Nazis have discarded, not only the Christian theology, but also the values and ideals of love, fraternity, compassion, justice, etc. They may on occasion employ the same names, but they mean something quite different. Justice, for example, means not an absolute moral value but that which serves the German people or, practically, that which serves the leaders' lust for domination and power. Leaving out of account their pretensions to a positive New Order, the most obvious fact about them is their hatred of the old order, of traditional European ideals and valuations: they are the active Nihilists, the youth whose 'mission' it is to destroy and ravage. The immediate issue between these active Nihilists and their opponents is, of course, clear enough, since, owing to the dialectic of history, it can be seen in nationalist terms: but the wider, and indeed ultimate, issue is between 'Nihilism' in general and the acceptance of absolute truth and absolute values. This division runs through all nations and peoples and classes, and on the solution of this wider conflict the future of Europe depends. I say that the division runs through all nations and peoples, since it is an unfortunate fact that Nihilism harbours even within the

<sup>3</sup>I do not mean to imply that Nietzsche himself would have considered Hitler his spiritual child.



camp of the political enemies of Nazism. It is indeed true that some of Germany's opponents profess to be fighting in defence of Christian civilisation, though a good many of those who profess to believe this probably understand by 'Christian civilisation' little more than the values of decency, fairness, moderation and so on, in opposition to the extreme callousness, deceit and treachery practised by the Nazis; but at the same time we witness the not uncommon fear that the old order has been deprived of its foundations and can no longer survive, while there is nothing better to put in its place, that Christian Europe is dead but that no constructive substitute is possible or at least that no constructive and positive substitute has yet been found. The war has become, in immediate fact, a dialectic of national spirits; but though men are determined to fight the war to a finish and rid the world of the immediate physical enemy, many of them look with fear and disillusionment on the future, sceptical as to the success of the positive work which should follow the war. What is this but a form of scepticism, of pessimism, of 'passive Nihilism'? Although the terrible danger of Nazi political domination has doubtless been averted, another danger remains, that the very opponents of Nazism be infected with a form of the same virus that they have combated in war, that a synthesis of the opposed spirits be effected in a blend all the more sinister perhaps in that the poison is less easily detected.

Light may be thrown on the general situation by a brief consideration of what Nietzsche considered to be the chief causes of Nihilism. Everybody who knows anything about Nietzsche knows that he was an atheist, that he considered the character of the world, as it is given in experience, to be incompatible with the existence of God, at least of God as depicted in Christian thought, and on this point he is at one with many men and women in contemporary Europe—an obvious fact that need not be elaborated. 'God is dead', said Nietzsche, meaning that belief in God is dead, and it was very largely to this loss of faith that he traced the genesis of Nihilism. In the Middle Ages faith was strong and vigorous: men and women certainly gave way to their lusts and passions in the Middle Ages as in other periods of the world's history, but God meant something to them and their



immorality they accounted sin: they might break the moral law, but they did not question the objective validity of the moral law, for they saw it as depending on the Divine Being in whom they believed. The absolute character of the moral law and of values in general was seen as a reflection or expression of the Absolute Being. In the modern era, however, the freer spirits have become sceptical, have lost their belief in God: they have come to see that the idea of God is but the creation of man's mind, that men, afraid to face the grim reality of a Godless world, had invented the idea of God and of a blissful hereafter. But if there is no God, what of absolute values, what of the universal and absolute moral law? What too of the purpose of human life and history, of the meaning of the world? Logically speaking, there can be no universal and absolute moral code, no strict obligation, no truly moral responsibility, no fixed purpose in human life and history—if there is no God: life is meaningless, purposeless, valueless. Yet in actual fact the very men who had ceased to believe in God still clung to the Christian moral valuations, however illogically: they had not the courage or the intellectual insight to draw the logical conclusion and to say, 'God is dead; therefore morality, in the sense of a universal and absolute, morally obligatory code, is dead too': they attempted to cling to the old moral values without believing in the metaphysical basis on which those values depended: they enshrined the old Christian conceptions in new slogans, such as *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, in democratic and socialistic formulae which derive ultimately from the Christian conception of man and stand or fall with Christianity and religion in general.

But this inconsistent attitude cannot last for ever, and moral valuations themselves will be subjected to sceptical questioning. But the ethical code, the moral values, which are being questioned and will be questioned, are precisely those values, that code, which have hitherto been accepted as *the* values, as *the* code, the Christian valuations which are interwoven with the whole fabric of an European culture, so that to question the Christian valuations is to question the old order in general, it is to sever oneself from the past, to uproot oneself from the cultural soil of centuries. For the European to question the Christian values is to



question *all* values, since they are the only values he knows, and this seems to question the very purpose and value of human life: existence becomes an insoluble riddle, human life appears to have no meaning. The first result of the denial of Christian values is the denial of *all* values and this is Nihilism, 'the absolute repudiation of worth, purpose, desirability'. Nietzsche indeed went on himself to demand the creation of new values, and others have followed him in this path (and not only in Germany), but the phase of Nihilism he traced historically, as I have shown, to atheism.

In tracing Nihilism to atheism Nietzsche was doubtless right and the Thomist would agree with the close attention affirmed by Nietzsche between Christian values and the absolute moral law on the one hand and Transcendent Being, God, on the other hand. If the atheist is *de facto* able to recognise moral obligation and, through a knowledge of the law, to come to a knowledge of the Lawgiver, that is obviously because there *is* a God; but Nietzsche is presupposing that there really is *no* God and, if we accept this assumption for purposes of argument, I think that St Thomas would agree with Nietzsche's conclusion concerning the moral law, at least in the full sense of the word. The hypothesis, 'if there were no God', is indeed an impossible hypothesis in fact, since, if there were no God, no Necessary Being, nothing at all would exist: if you cancel out God, you *ipso facto* cancel out all being whatever; but *if* (however absurd that 'if' may be in reality) there were no God, no Legislator, there could be no law: there might be a prudential standard of conduct, since to act against nature is always suicidal, but the maxims of self-interest would not be clothed with the full form of moral obligation. I do not mean to imply that the moral law depends on the arbitrary or capricious *Fiat* of the Divine Will (that is the view of Ockham, not of St Thomas); but it is perfectly clear that for the Angelic Doctor the Natural Law is the expression of the Eternal Law, the Divine Wisdom considered as directing all the motions and acts of creatures towards their end. God's plan for man is mirrored in man's rational appreciation of his nature and of the acts which are consonant with that nature, so that, as St Thomas teaches, the natural law is a participation of the eternal law in the rational



creature. It follows that, if there were no eternal law, there would be no natural law in the full sense. In the concrete, of course, the atheist is not justified, since he is able to come to a knowledge of the Lawgiver who actually exists, the Source of the law that is inscribed in the nature of every man; but, *merely in the abstract and logically speaking*, the atheist would be correct in drawing from his atheistic assumption the conclusion that there is no universally binding, morally obligatory and absolute natural law. One may perhaps see a dim recognition of this fact in the widespread acknowledgment that there should be some religious teaching in the national schools, since one cannot help feeling that some at least of those who acknowledge the advisability of such religious teaching do so, not so much because they firmly believe in any given doctrine as because they see that moral teaching needs to be buttressed by religious doctrine if it is to win practical acceptance.

It may indeed be objected that human nature would still be human nature, even if there were no God, even if the Universe could be explained on a materialistic basis, so that, even if the *form* of the moral law, or obligation in the full sense, would be absent, the *content* of the moral law, the actual precepts and prohibitions of morality, would be the same in a godless world as they are now; but it must be remembered that the introduction of a scale or hierarchy of being and the assertion that rational nature is superior to irrational nature, so that the dictates of reason must be followed in preference to the unregulated impulses of sense, implies a fixed standard of judgment, a background, as it were, of Absolute Being, in reference to which one level of nature is objectively 'higher' than another. One may, it is true, consider the content of morality without explicit reference to God (this is what Aristotle did for the most part), but the conception of man as superior to all other beings in the material cosmos in virtue of his possession of reason, implies the existence of an objective and absolute standard of value. Moreover, how can there be a fixed standard of human conduct, which is at the same time not *purely* utilitarian, if it is not transcendently grounded in Absolute Being? This seems to me, at least, to represent the view of St Thomas Aquinas who, in common with other consistent theistic



philosophers, provided the transcendental foundation and background to the Greek ethic.

Now, if Nietzsche was logically justified in deriving Nihilism from atheism, he is equally justified from the viewpoint of history. In the modern era theoretical attempts have been made to find a non-theistic foundation for an absolute and universal moral law, of which attempts the most notable is probably that of Immanuel Kant, who tried to free the Categorical Imperative from a transcendental (in the sense of theistic) foundation and to base it on what he regarded as a surer foundation. Now, Kant was himself a sincerely moral man and he considered that he had vindicated the *a priori* and absolute character of moral obligation; but, leaving alone the question of the validity or invalidity of the Kantian theory as theory, the practical effect on lesser mortals is naturally to suggest to them that man is himself the author of the moral law and that he is consequently above the moral law. Such a conclusion would certainly be abhorrent to Kant himself and he would not have regarded it as a justifiable conclusion from his ethic; but all the same it is the practical result of all attempts to establish a non-transcendentally-grounded ethic. At the beginning of the modern era Francis Bacon stressed knowledge as a means to power, as a means to mankind's extending dominion over nature, a harmless enough attitude in itself perhaps, but one which has been fraught with great consequences since the dominion of man has, in the course of time, come to be asserted without restriction, to be asserted even in face of the moral law, even against God himself, so that God, so far as he is admitted at all, is admitted only on terms laid down by man himself. As Kierkegaard remarks sarcastically: 'It is now so long a time since God has let himself be heard from as proprietor and master that Christianity has consequently reverted to us, who can either decide to abolish it altogether, or to modify it *ad libitum*, very much as we might deal with our own possession or invention, treating Christianity, not as something which in obedient subservience to God's Majesty must be believed, but as something which in order to be acceptable must try by the aid of *reasons* to satisfy "the age", "the public", "this distinguished assembly", etc.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Point of View.*



Plato in the *Laws* declared that God is the measure of all things, but modern man has reverted to the dictum of Protagoras, denied by Plato, that *man* is the measure of all things, man the creator and final arbiter. Yet man finds that, human absolutism once granted, mankind, instead of making that steady Progress expected naïvely by the nineteenth century under the influence of evolutionary dogmas, *descends*, gets itself into a thorough mess, and, if it declines to recognise its root error and to retrace its steps, nihilistic scepticism, disillusionment and a hidden despair are inevitable.

Another cause, though allied to the first, was assigned by Nietzsche as a cause of Nihilism, and that is the contemporary vulgarisation of life, the 'Bourgeois' ideals of the nineteenth century. One of the tragedies of Nietzsche's personal life was his increasing isolation and loneliness: when the friendship with Richard Wagner was broken off and he became estranged from Erwin Rohde, the philologist, Nietzsche entered into a great solitude, which increased his feeling of separation, of being a man apart. There were several reasons for this, of course, but one of them was that he found, or professed to find, in his friends a character all-too-human, a surrender to the 'herd', to the 'public', to mediocrity. The great musician pandered to the tastes of the age, became vulgar, narrowly egoistic and finally 'Christian', Rohde surrendered to the demands of a bourgeois career and became a 'craven specialist', a disgruntled and narrow-minded university professor. Now, if such men, men of great potentialities, were spoiled, the blame must be laid at the door of modern society. Christianity taught that all were brethren in Christ and held up the idea of a flock of sheep: all that differentiates, that distinguishes man from man, beauty, intellectual talent, artistic genius, was belittled, disparaged and reviled: it is the lowly and downtrodden, the humanly inferior specimens whom God exalts, while he hates and rejects the free and the independent and the strong. Catholic Christianity admitted a spiritual aristocracy at least, but Protestantism denied it and fostered the notion of equality, creating millions of popes instead of one. Democracy, which is simply secularised Christianity, has extended these conceptions to the political sphere: everyone is to have the vote, everyone is to have but one ideal, that of being an industrious



citizen, a useful member of the State, a member of the human ant-heap. The modern national State endeavours to make all its citizens cogs in the State-machine, institutes national education and attempts to form the citizens in a common mould, caring nothing for true culture, which is an affair of the individual. State-socialism of an advanced type would go still further and reduce everyone to the level of slaves of efficiency, of economics: the scramble to obtain a living, which preoccupies so many people in the liberal State, will be replaced by security, but it will be replaced by a security bought at the price of real independence and individuality. In modern society, together with an attempt to ameliorate the lot of the poor, one can see the tendency to level *down*, to vulgarise and standardise life, until books, newspapers, sermons, the theatre, must all appeal to the popular taste which sets the standard. Men and women take refuge from deeper problems in superficial activity: of heroic virtue and diabolic wickedness they are mostly equally incapable, vulgar in their virtues, vulgar in their sins. Science makes strides far beyond the dreams of past ages, but mankind sinks meanwhile into a crushing mediocrity, practical materialism, banality of every description, and the reign of *quality* is replaced by the reign of *quantity*.

Against this vulgarisation of man, against bourgeois and materialistic civilisation others besides Nietzsche have raised their voices in fierce denunciation and appeal—Kierkegaard and Léon Bloy, for instance, but Nietzsche's proffered remedy was hardly a salutary remedy. Disgusted with mankind in general he called on those who had ears to hear to set themselves free from the slavery of the herd, from the standards and valuations of the all-too-many: he envisaged the coming of nature's aristocrats, who would raise the human type above the unheroic level of the bourgeois world and create the myth of the Superman, the personification of intellectual talent and independence, physical perfection, of quality, bound by no slavery, deceived by no mirage, either of absolute truth and falsehood, beyond good and evil. But at the same time he was aware, even if insufficiently aware, that to break through the accepted standards of mankind is a dangerous proceeding, that the man who does so may easily fall below those standards instead of rising above them: he saw that disgust with



contemporary life and society, with man as he is, may easily produce hatred and loathing that will express itself in destruction and ravage, for a certain type of man may turn in blind rage against the order of society that stifles and fetters his activity and find an outlet for his energy and his hatred in Nihilistic destruction. The vulgarization of man, the worship of quantity, of mediocrity, may thus lead on the one hand to a loss of faith in man, a mere disgust with man, passive Nihilism, and on the other hand to active Nihilism, the destructive activity of the New Barbarians.

Whether or not we think that Nietzsche's denunciation of the human society of his time is in any way applicable to our own age, it is perhaps not altogether fanciful to see in the fanatical devotion of not a few of the German youth to the person of the Führer, in their fanatical loyalty and heroism, a part-result at least of revulsion from the apparently tame life of bourgeois Europe, which could otherwise offer them no heroic career but only an existence as servants of the State or atoms in the economic ant-heap. On the other hand there are those who are in some degree 'misfits', even outcasts from society, the dregs of the populace (not necessarily in the snobbish class sense at all), who, finding that they cannot make their way or gratify their egoism in the old order, vent their resentment and rage and disappointed egoism in a determined attempt to destroy the old order. A man of this sort, given the appropriate circumstances, may rise to the pinnacles of power and be acclaimed by millions of followers, but he remains essentially what he was before, a 'barbarian from below', impelled by the lust to destroy, by the instincts of resentment and revenge, by his own deep-seated sense of inferiority, and not by a true desire for the heroic, still less by the urge to create a truly constructive new order on the ruins of the old.

This dissatisfaction with the unheroic, mediocre life of bourgeois Europe was one of the reasons why Nietzsche sometimes sang the praises of war. (I say 'sometimes', since Nietzsche was not blind to certain of the evils of war and, when he happened to be concentrating his attention on these aspects, condemned war.) He often thought of war as an appeal to heroism and a means of enkindling heroism, as a lightning-thrust of stark reality at the



drab stage-scenery of everyday life, as a health-giving and purifying influence. His attitude is echoed by the poet Stefan George in the lines:—

*Zehntausend muss der heilige wahnsinn schlagen,  
Zehntausend muss die heilige seuche raffén,  
Zehntausende der heilige krieg.*

(Ten thousand must the holy madness strike,  
Ten thousand must the sacred sickness snatch,  
Tens of thousands the holy war.)

George, like Nietzsche, thought (at any rate at one period) of war as a purifying tonic, and in some respects they both merely re-echoed the words of Hegel when he declares that by war the ethical health of the nations is preserved.

One can to a certain degree perhaps (even if but in a slight degree) sympathise with this romantic attitude towards war, since it is an undoubted fact that in war men perform acts of heroism and self-sacrifice which they might not perform in other circumstances; but the attitude is romantic and unrealist and takes scant account of the fact that heroism may be realised in much quieter and more peaceful circumstances, even if less spectacularly, and that war as such is a symptom of ill-health, of lack of balance. Health, St Thomas would say, is to be found in order, tranquillity, balance, rather than in disorder, frenzy and excess. If Nietzsche disliked the smugness, self-satisfaction and selfishness which mar so much of peacetime life, he was mistaken in seeking the remedy in something which may indeed occasion acts of heroism and self-sacrifice but which is essentially characterised by all manner of disorder and which is very far from promoting those very cultural values on which Nietzsche himself laid such stress. What did the wars of Religion do for culture in either France or Germany, what is the present war doing for the promotion of culture? It is doubtless quite true that the war, so far as the Allied cause is concerned, is necessary for the preservation of our cultural heritage; but that does not mean that the war as such is an intrinsic good—and the evil of war may become even more plain to us in the period of aftermath.

Nietzsche's cry was, therefore, a cry of disgust at what he accounted the contemporary vulgarisation of man and society,



a cry too for a new realisation of *qualitative* differentiation, for a new order of rank, for new values or what he thought were new values; but it was the cry of a man who had lost faith and who refused, defiantly refused, to accept the metaphysical foundation which alone can give objective validity to any scale of values. He condemned the modern shallow view of man's nature and purpose and potentialities, but at the same time he denied the very condition which alone can confer objective value on human life. Nietzsche theoretically denied absolute truth, at the very least he denied the attainability of absolute truth—all 'truth' was for him perspectival, relative to a particular type of being, i.e., in the concrete relative to man—but as we read his impassioned pages we can have little doubt that Nietzsche really did consider the values he asserted to be *objectively* superior to the values he disparaged. In theory he might deny this, but in practice he affirmed it. Now, St Thomas argues cogently in his fourth way of proving the existence of God (to be found both in the *Summa Theologica* and in the *Summa contra Gentes*) that the existence of an objective scale of values, an objective hierarchy of perfections, involves the existence of a Supreme Perfection, who is Origin and Cause of all finite perfections and so is the Condition and metaphysical presupposition of all objective values. If human nature is possessed of an intrinsic value, if men participate in perfection, these perfections must be *received*, and if the Origin and Condition of finite perfection is denied, the finite perfection is also inevitably denied. For the very establishment of the values asserted by Nietzsche it is, therefore, necessary to affirm the existence of God, and, though Nietzsche considered that the notion of God is inimical to human nature and human life, this is not so in reality. Human nature, as the Angelic Doctor teaches, is a finite imitation of the Divine Perfection and so possesses intrinsic value: it is not true of Catholic Christianity at least that it so concentrates on the supernatural as to disparage and belittle the natural. Grace elevates man, human nature, but it does not destroy it, and the development of natural gifts, of intellectual ability, of artistic talent, of the natural powers of heart and will, is according to the Divine Plan. The moral law may, it is true, forbid the development or use of natural gifts in certain ways, but this does not mean, as Nietzsche supposed, that the



moral law is hostile to the natural development of man's potentialities. There might be some excuse for affirming such an hostility if the moral law were purely arbitrary and capricious, but it is the clear teaching of St Thomas that moral conduct is ultimately that conduct which expresses man's true nature. To speak anthropomorphically, God, seeing human nature as a finite imitation of his Divine Essence, sees a certain line of conduct as expressive of that nature, another line of conduct as contradicting that nature: the first line of conduct he commands, the second he forbids. To disregard the natural law on the plea that that law is hostile to nature is, therefore, foolish and suicidal and can only lead to the ruin and degradation of man. Nietzsche himself tended to look on man as more or less a bundle of impulses and instincts and demanded an *integration* of those impulses and instincts into a strong, unified, yet many-sided, rich personality; but what meaning can be attached to such a demand, if there is no standard of integration, and what ultimate objective standard can there be save the idea of man in the Divine Mind? Even if a merely aesthetic standard is asserted, a transcendental foundation of that standard must in the end be asserted, if the standard is to be objectively valid. Thus Nietzsche's notion that a universal and absolute moral law is necessarily hostile to man, particularly the higher type of man, is erroneous, since, even granted the existence of a 'higher type' of man, he is still man and man as such, possessing the essence of man which is specifically the same in all men, can develop himself, perfect himself truly, only through conduct in accordance with that nature. Nietzsche's ideal man, when shorn of certain objectionable features, is man perfected in the natural order: now, St Thomas would sympathise with this ideal, as far as it goes, but he would point out that Nietzsche sins against his own ideal on the one hand and that his ideal is not a high enough ideal on the other hand, that Nietzsche thinks too lowly of man. He sins against his own ideal of developed and perfected man, inasmuch as he falsifies the nature of man. Man, as St Thomas teaches, has, like every other creature, an essential relation of dependence on the Creator, but, among the creatures of this material world, it is man's prerogative that he can recognise that dependence consciously, can welcome and affirm it, can choose to



be himself in his deepest essence. Nietzsche denied that relation, but it is not something contingent or accidental, like my relation to the chair on which I am sitting, for it is interwoven with the very fibres of man's being, so that a man cannot truly and profitably affirm himself, develop himself, even in the purely natural order, unless he affirms and develops himself in that relation to God the Creator. Moreover, Nietzsche's ideal of man is not only a false and one-sided view, but it is also too low a view, since he excludes the supernatural vocation of man, which is man's crowning dignity and glory: in pretending to elevate man, he debases him.

These points may possibly seem at first to be over-academic in character, and the devoted disciple of Nietzsche would doubtless comment sarcastically 'Back to the old stable!', but a glance at Nietzsche's own life and at the modern world in general shows quite clearly the consequence of denying that essential relation to God on which St Thomas insists. By denying the creature-Creator relation Nietzsche re-echoed the old promise, *Eritis sicut dii*, 'Ye shall be as gods'; he dethrones God to set man in the place of God, man the creator, the arbiter of truth and falsehood, good and evil. But man is not God, and the path of self-deification is the path to inner tension, psychological disturbance, despair and madness. Nietzsche sometimes posed as the cool, sceptical observer, but as a matter of fact he was nothing of the kind; he was a preacher, a prophet—of man, of Antichrist: brought up in the Christian tradition, naturally somewhat timid, sensitive and retiring, he reacted against what he recognised to be his natural temperament and bent of character by lauding strength, power, independence, independence vis-à-vis God, he called himself Antichrist and hurled defiance at the Crucified with an increasing violence, a violence so extreme that it betrays his inner state of tension, the fact that he could not rid himself of the thought of Christ. The superficially irreligious man may forget God and Christ and find a certain satisfaction in purely temporal concerns, but Nietzsche could not forget God or Christ—on the contrary, he regarded Christ as an enemy, a real enemy: he turned himself into an enemy of Christ, to whom, in one aspect of his nature, he was constantly drawn: he tried to put himself in the place of



Christ, as Antichrist, and he ended in madness. It is true that Nietzsche's final breakdown may very probably be traced to *physical* causes, into which it is unnecessary to enter now; but, even if this be true, a good deal of the disturbance in his mental life may be traced to his atheism, his *defiant* atheism, his *defiant* denial of the creature-Creator relationship. In a passage quoted in my book on Nietzsche Rudolf Allers, the psychologist, affirms that 'A really thorough-going analysis of neurotic mentality will discover that in all cases of neurosis without exception the real problem is one of metaphysics. The conflict at the root of neurosis is . . . between the original *superbia* of fallen man (which, begotten of sin and leading back to it, makes him strive after infinity) and his recognition of his essential finiteness.' And, lest it be thought that Allers, as a Catholic, is speaking *pro domo sua*, let me point out that Jung who, whatever one may think of his theoretical psychology, has had great experience in practical psycho-therapy, also affirms the value of religion in stabilising and strengthening the psychological state of the individual. 'The problem is one of metaphysics': would not St Thomas say the same?

From Nietzsche's personal life let us turn to the modern world in general. Once man has been set free, i.e., has set himself free, from subjection to God and the moral law, once he has asserted his independence of the transcendental by denying its existence, once he has declared himself to be 'man the creator', what results? No doubt there is at first a sense of boundless freedom—Nietzsche speaks of the infinite vistas that open out when God is dead—of limitless opportunity for creative action, for the end and purpose of man's life is no longer something fixed and clear, something given from a source outside man and above man; but, if there is to be creative activity at all, if human nature is to be developed, if human society is to be formed in a new way, there must be some clear conception of the end to be achieved, the model to be realised in concrete fact. Who is to fix this end, who is to delineate the model? Man himself. Yes, but there is no individual man-in-himself, there are only individual men and women. The inevitable result is, then, that some men, those who have the ability, the opportunity, the power and drive and energy, take it upon themselves to fix the end of man and the ideal nature of human society,



not only for themselves, but also for others: they may do this ostensibly in the name of Mankind, but actually they speak in their own names, they express their own subjective wills. Nietzsche, of course, had no opportunity to legislate in this way; but to other men the opportunity has come and they have taken it. Proclaiming themselves to be the vanguard of humanity, nature's aristocrats, thinking of themselves as the lords of the earth, they create their own myth, the myth of the Race, the myth of the Blood, the myth of the Proletariat or whatever it may be, they force their own conceptions on other people with ruthless determination. Moreover, once the idea of man is no longer seen in relation to its metaphysical background, once man is made the supreme object in existence, then (paradoxical as it may at first sound) the individual human being is deprived of his or her intrinsic value, of his or her natural rights, and is turned into a mere means to the realisation of some humanly-conceived scheme. In the name of humanity, in the name of ascending life and the improvement of the species, man the creator does not hesitate to resort to compulsory sterilisation, eugenic practices that are applicable only in the farmyard, liquidation of the mentally or physically disabled and unfit. The practical results of atheism may be seen in the gas-chambers erected for the liquidation of imbeciles and inferior peoples, in the concentration camps, in the reduction of man to an economic cipher, in the slave-gangs at work on some great canal. In other words, an anthropocentric anthropology, a doctrine of man that divorces him from God, leads in the end to tyranny of one sort or another, to the degradation of man: the recognition of the dignity of man can be assured only if his humility is at the same time recognised, if he is seen as a creature, as dependent on God, as directed towards God, if he is seen as St Thomas sees him. We cannot of course return to the Middle Ages, nor is it desirable to attempt an impossible reversal of history, we are not called upon to cry after a past that is gone: we are called upon to create, to form or mould, but this we can never do unless our work of creation is an application to modern conditions of true principles, the principles of the perennial philosophy. As an historical man, St Thomas belonged to the thirteenth century, but his theological and philosophical synthesis as a whole transcends



temporal limitation and is susceptible of an ever profounder penetration, of an application to our modern society in a way which would enrich, safeguard and promote the true welfare of man.

One final point. The Thomist will certainly sympathise with Nietzsche's reaction from the vulgarisation of life, from the totalitarianism of the modern State and the mechanical notion of equality, since (*pace* Nietzsche) the Christian, as represented by St Thomas, does not consider that all men are qualitatively equal or that they should be all qualitatively equal. The Divine Perfection is mirrored in creatures according to different levels or grades of created being and St Thomas expressly states in the *Summa Theologica* that the inequality of created things is from God (Ia. 47, 2). He is speaking primarily, in the passage to which I refer, of the hierarchic ordering of genera and species, in accordance with which animals, for example, are more perfect than plants, men than animals, but he also teaches that no one man can exhaust the potentialities of the essence of man, that the essence of man is realised in a multitude of individuals in such a way that each individual has his or her part to play in unfolding the richness of the Divine idea of man. It is true that if we fix our eyes exclusively on the infinite distance that separates the creature from the Creator or if, for example, we consider exclusively the theological fact of original sin, there is a sense in which we can say that all human beings are equal, since all of them are born in original sin; but if we consider men and women in their concrete individuality, we certainly cannot say that they are all equal or that they ought to be all equal. They are not equal in physical perfection, they are not equal in intellectual talent, they are not equal in holiness and the gifts of grace (though all are called to be saved), and this inequality is, as St Thomas teaches, from God: it is an inequality which must be respected, for individual talents are given by God to be developed. From this point of view we may welcome any scheme of education which will foster the growth of individual talent and gifts. At the same time the Angelic Doctor would insist that all human beings are men, that they all possess the essence of man—St Thomas was no nominalist—and that respect for qualitative differentiation must not blind us to that root equality, that we cannot follow Nietzsche in



sacrificing the so-called herd on the altar of the higher men. That may be the way of the Nazi, but it is not the way of St Thomas.

If Nietzsche had been born at a later date and had retained his sanity, if he had lived to see the practical results of the sort of teaching he represented, he might have come down from the clouds of the false optimism in which he tried to live and have acknowledged that Nihilism can be overcome only through the assertion of absolute values, based on a metaphysical and transcendental foundation. He was quite right in tracing Nihilism to loss of belief: if he had lived he might have had the courage and honesty to acknowledge that the way out of the modern crisis does not lie in a mere appeal for heroism, in a cult of a natural aristocracy, in turning man in to God, but rather in a humble recognition of Reality, of Absolute Being, of the supremacy of truth and of the moral law; not in a one-sided and exaggerated revulsion from modern life but in a sane, balanced and adequate anthropology, such as is best represented by the massive and majestic synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas.



# The Aquinas Society of London

---

Founded in 1928

*President:* Mr RICHARD O'SULLIVAN, Q.C.

The Aquinas Society exists in order to study the principles of Thomist philosophy—not solely by reference to the writings of St Thomas but also in relation to other philosophical systems—with a view to their application to the intellectual ethical and social problems of the day. Meetings are usually held each month.

Membership is open to all who are interested in philosophy, irrespective of religious denomination.

The minimum annual subscription is ten shillings, due on 1st November of each year. Subscribers are entitled to certain free copies of the Society's publications each year, with a special concession for country members.

Further particulars may be had from the Hon. Secretary, J. B. Wells, 476 Upper Richmond Road, Richmond, Surrey.

**Price 2s. net**